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ABSTRACT

One pluralistic method for teaching advanced composition reflects the approaches of two texts: Linda Flower's "Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing" and Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor's "A Rhetoric of Argument." Such an approach combines the practical tasks of arguing for consensus proposals with functional rather than formalistic rhetorical methods. One strength of the Fahnestock and Secor book is their opening discussion on thesis and support. They point to kinds of support and what can go wrong, specifically covering the needs to address feasibility and to anticipate refutations. In a subsequent chapter they cover the issues of ethos, voice, moderation, and disclaimers. The most important aspect of Flower's text is her emphasis on Rogerian argument. This stresses the actual world necessity of compromise to achieve mutually satisfactory goals. Thus, both texts can be combined effectively in making assignments for proposals that are tailored to the students' interests: one classifies and functionally analyzes the types of argument, the other emphasizes achieving consensus and shared goals. (HOD)

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Rhetoric and Problem-Solving Strategies in Advanced Composition: A Pluralistic Approach

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Rhetoric and Problem-Solving Strategies in Advanced Composition:
A Pluralistic Approach

1. Introduction

1.1 My title, "Rhetoric and Problem-Solving Strategies" reflects my pluralistic effort in teaching Advanced Composition to blend the approaches of two recent texts: Linda Flower's Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing and Jeanne Fahnestock & Marie Secor's A Rhetoric of Argument. I do not intend to present book reviews; rather I plan to use the two exemplary texts as a means of engaging the larger issues of designing a pluralistic methodology which maximizes the advantages of each text -- that is, combining practical tasks of arguing for consensus proposals with functional rather than formalistic rhetorical methods.

1.2 In addition to these two books, other cogent articles have appeared recently. [See Appendix] I'll refer to these, not only to sharpen my discussion, but also to show how reasonable I am in modifying my position when new, persuasive arguments appear.

2. Approaches

Fahnestock & Secor's article (CCC 1983) effectively identifies the three basic approaches to teach argument: 1. logical/analytical, 2.

content/problem-solving, 3. rhetorical/generative.

2.1 Like F&S, I initially rejected the logic approach, because it is more a tool or means of analysis than an end. Teaching formal logic may not transfer any better into students' composing process for ordinary arguments than teaching grammar transfers into composing discourse in general. But the key here may be teaching logic or grammar in isolation, versus teaching such skills in the context of larger tasks leading to student-generated arguments. Thus, I am not now so quick to dismiss teaching logic from my pluralism, although I would place it in a subordinate position in service of the other two major approaches. [See Appendix for Kaufer & Neuwirth (CE 1983) and responses (CE 1984).]

2.2 Since my intent is to argue for greater attention to the problem-solving dimension in constructing our individual pluralisms, let me take F&S's own approach, rhetorical/generative, next [in keeping with the structure of reserving for last the point that one wishes to stress].

In their book and article, F&S classify all argument into four categories: categorical propositions (definitions), causal statements (cause & effect), evaluations, and proposals. They argue that: "If we take students through these four types of argument, from the simpler...to the complex [hence, the "generative" label for the progressive or cumulative development of the four categories]..., we have a coherent rationale for organizing a course in argument" (CCC, 23). However, in my classroom applications, the beginning and the end

of the book turned out to be more useful than the middle; therefore, let me limit my discussion to these strong areas.

While there are disagreements on the extent to which we should teach formal logic, the fallacies, and rhetorical terminology, I believe one strength of F&S's text lies in minimizing the distancing often produced by excessive specialized terminology. In particular, I find their opening discussion on thesis and support to be simple and direct, using the concept of enthymemic structure without interposing this specialized terminology.

On type #4, Proposals, they do well discussing the kinds of support and what can go wrong, specifically covering the need to address <u>feasibility</u> and to anticipate <u>refutations.</u> In a subsequent chapter, Accommodation, they cover concisely issues of ethos, voice, moderation, and disclaimers. While they are open to criticism for putting this chapter at the end, since these matters must be addressed early and throughout the composing process, this position can be explained, first, by the inevitable linear structure of bound books, and second, by the developmental structure of their classification system which forms the framework of the book. For teaching purposes, we can assign this chapter simultaneously with others early on.

2.3 In making problem-solving one goal and governing principle of an advanced comp course, in which at least the final, if not more than one, assignment is a thoroughly developed proposal to solve some actual-world problem, I have referred students both to F&S's end chapters and to Linda Flower's book.

I do not want to discuss the major part of Flower's book -- her functional suggestions for composing and editing -- because this would take me off on the tangent of cognitive science and attempts to codify heuristics of folk psychology). For my purpose here, the most important aspect of Flower's text is her emphasis on Rogerian argument. This stresses the actual-world necesity of compromise to achieve mutually satisfactory shared goals.

The ideology implicit here touches social action, public affairs, and business management, as well as an individual's personal life interactions. This ideology refelects the pragmatic aim to inform and train pre-professional and professional students in their responsibilities to make workable and socially responsible decisions in their professional roles. [As an undergraduate in a management program at what at that time was Carnegie Tech, before the Young new rhetoric era, I recognize this characteristic of professional training.]

My position is that it should be an important part of any advanced comp course to familiarize all students, not just professional and managerial specialists, with the socially responsible activity of arguing for workable, shared goals in solving actual problems. These should be problems in which the writers are personally interested and in which their proposals could influence actual-world decisions.

3. Problem-Solving in Actuality

3.1 F&S, in their CCC article (1983) object to certain aspects of the problem-solving approach; however, these seem to me to be based on special and restrictive cases. With a balanced pluralism, content need not "crowd out the writing instruction," and principles and methods of argument can be addressed explicitly (p. 22). The relevance of the problem-solving approach is greater than F&S's examples of case studies or interdisciplinary courses.

Problem-solving in the actual "world outside of academic classes" exists in social situations in which decisions must be made: to buy X rather than Y, to chop down the trees, to ban or not ban a textbook, or to take other such actions.

Hugh Rank, in his recent book on the language of politics, The Pep Talk (which follows his even better book on the language of advertising, The Pitch), succinctly states some propositions which apply to all such problem-solving situations: (1) People often agree about general goals (we all seek "the good") but disagree about specific means; (2) Expect few clear-cut choices between "good" and "bad"--most problems involve the "greater of two goods" or the "lesser of two evils"; thus many policy arguments are about "degree" (how much?) and "priority" (what should be done first?); (3) Expect compromises, concessions, trade-offs, deals; most issues are negotiable.

3.2 Thus, one benefit of problem-solving is that it introduces students to the more practical kinds of writing required in the actual "worlds outside of academic classes" -- the social, the political, the

commercial.

One reliable informant describes the primary kind of persuasive writing she does in business as: convincing higher-ups to take a specific course of action. The structure of the communication goes like this: (1) provide short background, (2) state the problem, (3) state the goal, (4) discuss alternatives to reach the goal, (5) make a recommendation. Moreover, collaborative writing is a particular circumstance for composing, which is more prevalent in the outside world and in disciplines other than English. It is now getting some of our attention, partly as a result of the prevalence of the process approach and the National Writing Project inservices, which stress peer editing groups, and partly as a result of researchers studying the actual conditions of working writers. [See Appendix for the collaborative work of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford.]

3.3 Another benefit of the problem-solving approach, lies in the affective or motivational domain. This approach engages students at the level of their interests and capacities. We can grant that students will be committed to their writing, if they feel that their proposals may make a difference in the actual world, or add to the knowledge they need to make a decision of their own.

3.4 In contrast to this more personal and pragmatic approach, certain formalists and structuralists among rhetoricians are concerned with, in the words of Kaufer & Neuwirth, "independent criteria for evaluating the structure of an argument apart from its meaning" (CE, 197). In Kaufer's recent article, on teaching the development of

policy arguments, he produces a useful hierarchical schema on the levels of policy conflict. [see Appendix] While Kaufer's solution for the more complex conflicts of "global values" is another schema for analyzing and developing "competing analogies," this may teach argumentative skill, but not practical resolutions of conflicts.

Many students, unlike some at selective colleges like CMU, may not be as quick to pick up, nor be as interested in, forensics and exercises to simulate lawyers constructing the best briefs for their policies. This is one reason I label my assignment a <u>proposal</u> (following F&S), or a position paper. And it is more closely related to the assumptions behind Ken Macrorie's "I-Search" -- a personally-signficant piece of research -- than the empty formalism of the lamentably still-prevalent approach of assigning papers by so-called forms or modes (such as, definition, comparison/contrast, process, etc).

3.5 Why does the tendency persist to teach empty formalism? -- that is, forms to be filled up, rather than starting with problems, positions, ideas to be discovered and then seeking the appropriate strategies of arrangement and exemplification necessary for effective communication. I believe one answer lies in the way most English and writing teachers are trained, their minimizing practical problem-solving, and their commitment to an academic ideology of rational, liberal humanism.

4. Here follows a brief tirade on problem-solving vs the traditional training of English teachers and the rhetorician's ideology of

rational, liberal humanism.

4.1 What's missing in the training of most teachers of literature, writing, and rhetoric is familiarity with the scientific method of research: that is, (1) forming research questions, (2) framing working hypotheses, (3) testing them with appropriate evidence and possible falsification, and (4) modifying them in terms of new evidence. Most of our graduate school assignments and professional writing consist of assembling diverse materials, composing arguments with elegant or plausible analogies, and offering concluding interpretations.

4.2 Problem-solving also corrects the academic tendency of rhetoricians and liberal humanists, in general, to place excessive faith in reason and rational argumentation. I reduce their ideology to something like this: teach the production of rigorous logical arguments because they stand the best chance of establishing truth and prevailing in the open competition of ideas in the free market of a democratic society in which all contending positions have de facto equal opportunity. There is a problem with this position, beyond its theoretical assumption that we are operating in a rational universe. Just because you have good logic doesnt mean that you will prevail in the marketplace. In actuality, there may be a kind of Gresham's Law that bad reasoning, like bad money, can drive out the good. We all can supply examples.

5. The Necessity of Problem-solving pluralism.

In concluding my proposal for a pluralistic approach which synthesizes logic, rhetoric, and problem-solving, let me stress that the

determinant element is a problem which is susceptible to a consensus solution. Most complex problems and social issues cannot be resolved on the basis of persuasive argumentation alone, or even on indisputable evidence. Usually there are competing and unresolved facts; there are "political" considerations, or "least-worst" costs; ultimately, many issues are grounded in moral and ethical conflicts.

5.1 In making assignments for proposals that are tailored to the students' interests, I have found that F&S and Flower's texts can be combined effectively: one classifies and functionally analyzes the types of argument; the other emphasizes achieving consensus and shared goals. To help students select and control an appropriate problem, and to reinforce the Rogerian principle of restating the opposing views fairly, I found the following injunctions useful [listed at the bottom of your handout]:

5.2 Your position on the topic: Do not choose a topic or take a position on it unless you are prepared to be persuaded by cogent reasoning to change your mind. This should eliminate arguments grounded on fundamentally inflexible positions of faith, ethics, taste, or prejudice.

5.3 Your position on the opposition: Consider opposing views fairly. As Wayne Booth states, in his "self-denying ordinance:" "I will <u>try</u> to publish nothing about any book or article until I have <u>understood</u> it, which is to say, until I have reason to think that I can give an account of it that the author...will recognize as just" (<u>Critical Understanding,</u> p. 351).

APPENDIX

SUBJECT WORKS

Jeanne Fahnestock & Marie Secor, A Rhetoric of Argument (New York: Random House, 1982).

-- "Teaching Argument: A Theory of Types," CCC, 34 (February 1983), 20-30.
(1) Logical/Analytical
(2) Content/Problem-solving
(3) Rhetorical/Generative
1. Categorical propositions (definitions)
2. Causal statements (cause & effect)
3. Evaluations (good or bad)
4. Proposals (what should be done?)

Linda Flower, Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing (New York: HBJ, 1981).

WORKS CITED

Wayne C. Booth, Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism (U. Chicago, 1979).

Lisa Ede & Andrea Lunsford, "Why Write...Together?" Rhetoric Rev. 1 (January 1983), 150-157.

Andrea Lunsford, "Aristotelian vs. Rogerian Argument: A Reassessment," CCC, 30 (May 1979), 146-51.

David Kaufer & Christine Neuwirth, "Integrating Formal Logic and the New Rhetoric," CE, 45 (April 1983), 380-89, and responses: CE, 46 (February 1984), 187-198.

David Kaufer, "A Plan for Teaching the Development of Original Policy Arguments," CCC, 35 (February 1984), 57-70.
(1) misunderstanding the intended sense or reference
(2) misunderstanding the intended frame of reference
(3) applying different weight or criteria to evidence
(4) holding conflicting local values
(5) holding conflicting global values

Ken Macrorie, Searching Writing (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1980).

Hugh Rank, The Pitch (1982); The Pep Talk (1984) [available from NCTE]